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For Immediate Release
May 14, 2003
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REMOTE SENSING DEMONSTRATION PROJECT SEEKS TO DIAGNOSE ENVIRONMENTAL, SAFETY PROBLEMS POSED BY OLD UNDERGROUND COAL MINES

Big Stone Gap —The Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy (DMME) is collaborating with the U. S. Department of Energy's National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL) and the federal Office of Surface Mining (OSM) to use airborne remote sensing techniques to identify old, abandoned underground coal mine workings, DMME Director Gene Dishner announced today.

"Virginia has been working proactively for more than a decade to build an automated mapping database to help protect its coal miners, coalfield citizens and the environment from the hazards posed by old, abandoned and often unmapped underground coal mine workings," said Director Dishner. The use of state-of-the-art airborne and ground-based geophysical technologies and automated mapping technology in this state/federal partnership promises to significantly expand and enhance the database and improve our ability to predict and prevent problems like last year's Quecreek mine inundation in Pennsylvania."

Unmapped, unidentified or inaccurately mapped underground mine workings pose a number of threats to miner and public safety and to the environment. Abandoned mine workings often fill with water or oxygen-deficient air and dangerous gases following mining. If the workings are accidentally mined into, the rush of millions of gallons of water or bad air into the active mine can be fatal to the miners caught underground. Impounded water may also burst through the coal

seam to the surface if an inadequate barrier is left when mining ceases. Such events, called blowouts, have caused one fatality in Virginia and serious damage to public and private property and the environment. Surface coal refuse slurry impoundments have failed into old underground mine workings in Virginia and Kentucky resulting in significant pollution of streams and rivers.

Through the remote sensing demonstration project, the state/federal partnership has selected four sites in Wise County that simulate scenarios such as the Quecreek mine inundation, a large surface coal refuse slurry impoundment failure and acid mine drainage pollution. “We are very grateful for the cooperation and support we have received on the demonstration project from NETL Director, Carl Bauer, and staff and OSM Director, Jeff Jarrett, and staff,” said DMME Deputy Director Benny Wampler. “They have worked closely with DMME and brought their considerable expertise and experience in aerial remote sensing to the Virginia coalfield project.”

“We wanted to make sure the flyover schedule was announced in advance to avoid any undue alarm on the part of citizens who live in the areas where the aerial surveys will take place,” Wampler said. The flyovers will be conducted at a very low altitude by a helicopter that will have the sensing unit suspended below it. Several passes by the helicopter over a given area may be required to gather the desired information.

The flyovers of the Wise County sites will take place on May 21 and 22, 2003, in the following locations in Wise County:

- Black Creek area, 3.4 miles northwest of the City of Norton (away from any developed communities)
- Laurel Grove community near the headwaters of Powell River, 3.1 miles north, northwest of the City of Norton
- Wise Reservoir area, 2.8 miles east, southeast of the Town of Wise
- Toms Creek area, 1.2 miles north of the Town of Coeburn

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